

Coming of Age in Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of Ruskin Bond's the Room on the Roof

Divya Shikhar^{1,*}

Abstract

This research paper explores the human-nature relationship in Ruskin Bond's classic novel, "The Room on the Roof," through the lens of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, a critical theory examining literature's portrayal of the environment, provides a valuable framework for analyzing the novel's themes of escape, self-discovery, and the impact of human actions on the natural world. The paper analyzes the novel, demonstrating how Bond utilizes ecocriticism to depict the transformative power of nature and the yearning for a more harmonious relationship with the environment. The analysis reveals a constant contrast between the stifling confines of Mr. Harrison's house and the beckoning beauty of the Himalayas. The middle part deepens this contrast, showcasing the regenerative power of the mountains and the potential for sustainable living practices in the Himalayas, while also highlighting the environmental impact of the bustling Dehradun bazaar. Finally, the open-ended conclusion leaves room for interpretation, emphasizing the enduring allure of nature for Rusty and the ongoing challenge of balancing human desires with ecological responsibility. By analyzing the novel's settings, characters, and interactions with the natural world, the paper demonstrates how Bond utilizes ecocriticism to depict the transformative power of nature and the yearning for a more harmonious relationship with the environment. The analysis also sheds light on the complexities of maintaining this connection in a world with competing demands and societal expectations. Overall, the paper argues that "The Room on the Roof" serves as a valuable literary contribution to ecocritical discourse, offering a timeless exploration of the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ruskin bond, self-discovery, man, nature, coming of age

INTRODUCTION

In an era of escalating environmental concerns, literature flourishes as a powerful tool to explore humanity's relationship with the natural world. Ecocriticism emerges as a critical theory at the intersection of literature, culture, and ecology, fostering a deeper understanding of this complex dynamic. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (2002), one of the pioneering texts of ecology in America in the 1960s called for and also changed the usage pattern of harmful chemical pesticides [1]. Our surroundings are full of such concerns that call for our immediate attention, which may result in an apocalypse if not taken care of.

*Author for Correspondence
Divya Shikhar
E-mail: dshikhar0410@gmail.com

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Management Studies,
IITM Janakpuri, New Delhi, India

Received Date: April 15, 2024
Accepted Date: April 29, 2024
Published Date: May 08, 2024

Citation: Divya Shikhar. Coming of Age in Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of Ruskin Bond's the Room on the Roof. International Journal of Trends in Humanities. 2024; 1(1): 13–17p.

Ruskin Bond's enduring novel, "The Room on the Roof," transcends the boundaries of a coming-of-age story. Nestled amidst the foothills of the Himalayas, the narrative unfolds not just as Rusty grapples with adolescence and identity, but also as a poignant exploration of the human relationship with the natural world. Through an ecocritical lens, this paper delves into how Bond utilizes the contrasting landscapes and vibrant ecosystems to depict Rusty's journey of self-discovery and his yearning for a more harmonious connection with nature.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Himalayan region in Ruskin Bond's stories acts as a transformative backdrop, shaping characters' perceptions and choices. Its majestic beauty instills resilience and appreciation for nature, fostering a harmonious relationship with the environment. The mountains symbolize freedom, exploration, and spiritual reflection, influencing characters to make decisions in tune with the mountains' spirit of adventure and introspection. (Himanshu Kumar) [2].

L. Srividya delves into how Rusty's interactions with nature in the novel lead to an increase in mental health, independence, and hope for the future [3]. The natural setting influences Rusty's emotions and decisions, reflecting Bond's deep connection with the environment. Additionally, the article highlights how the vivid descriptions of the natural world in the novel serve not only as a backdrop but also as a crucial element in Rusty's character development.

Verma and Dhar talk of Ruskin Bond's stories capturing the natural beauty, diverse flora and fauna, local culture, spiritual significance, and environmental concerns of the Himalayan region. Through his writing, he brings to life the majestic landscapes, rich traditions, and delicate ecosystem of the mountains, offering readers a glimpse into this enchanting region's unique charm and challenges [4].

Goel focuses on the distortion of natural beauty intertwined to highlight the negative effects of human actions on the environment. These narratives serve as warnings about impending devastation, urging readers to reconsider their relationship with nature and take steps to protect the environment. Bond's stories emphasize the fragility of ecosystems and the need for environmental conservation, prompting reflection on the consequences of environmental degradation and the importance of preserving the delicate balance in nature.

Similarly, Dr. Sandip Kumar Mishra points out how the protagonist, Rakesh, in the short story *The Cherry Tree* (1980) evolves from enjoying cherries to developing a deep ecological understanding. Through interactions with nature and his grandfather's guidance, Rakesh's eco-consciousness grows. His nurturing of the cherry tree symbolizes a shift towards a bio-centric attitude, highlighting the importance of interconnectedness in the ecosystem and the need for eco-centric values for environmental care. Mishra writes, "Rakesh eco-consciousness grew with his observation of the natural surroundings... He witnessed the"(Mishra,119) [5].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes a qualitative research methodology, specifically a close reading approach with an ecocritical lens. The qualitative research methods used prioritize textual analysis and interpretation. This in-depth analysis is a hallmark of close reading approaches. It examines the novel's representations of nature, environmental issues, and the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. This specific focus brings an ecocritical perspective to the close reading.

This paper analyzes the novel beyond just a coming-of-age story. It critically examines how Bond portrays the natural world and its impact on Rusty. This challenges traditional readings that might overlook the environmental themes. This paper critically analyzes the contrasting settings of the house and the Himalayas. It questions the values associated with each – the artificiality of society versus the simplicity and potential sustainability of life closer to nature. The paper critically analyzes the open-ended conclusion. It considers how Rusty's lingering connection with nature and the enduring beauty of the Himalayas might influence readers' perceptions of the environment.

EXPLORING ECOCRITICISM: NATURE AS A NARRATIVE LENS IN LITERATURE

Based on this in the 1980s, Cheryll Glotfelty described Ecocriticism as an "increasingly heterogeneous movement" that takes an entirely earth-centered approach, believing that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it". According to Greg Garrard, the

challenge for ecocritics is “keeping one eye on how ‘nature’ is always [...] culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists”. (Alex,17) [6].

A literary trope that is often connected to Ecocriticism is 'Wilderness'. The early biblical notion of Wilderness holds it contrary to human existence. It was seen as a site of threat and a state of exile. Later on, it was on one hand seen as a purifying/healing agent in the Romantic age.

(Wordsworth, 9) [7] On the other hand, Tennyson describes it as, "nature, red in tooth and claw" in Victorian literature. In the American Psyche, the old wilderness was associated with demonic Practices, and in the New World, Wilderness is a site of exploration for more 'authentic existence' [8]. In India, nature has always been seen as pious and reverential since the Vedic ages with various deities dedicated to almost every element of the natural surroundings, for instance, Surya Dev (the sun god), Varun Dev (the water god), Pawan Dev (the wind god), Bhu Devi (the land goddess), etc. In rural areas shade of huge banyan trees are used as lounges. The bedtime children's stories have a natural landscape. Numerous other examples prove the deeply ingrained relation of culture and nature. This view was also seconded by the Upanishads and Puranas and adopted by the pioneers of English Literature in India like R K Narayan and Rabindranath Tagore. Contemporary writers have kept up with the tradition and their literary works provide substantial scope for analysis involving the Deep Ecology.

RUSKIN BOND'S LITERARY LANDSCAPE

Ruskin Bond is a celebrated Indian author of British descent, known for his heartwarming stories set in the foothills of the Himalayas. His debut novel, *The Room on the Roof* (1956), is a coming-of-age story that captured the hearts of readers worldwide. The novel follows Rusty, a teenage Anglo-Indian boy, who grapples with his identity and finds solace and self-discovery amidst the majestic beauty of the Himalayas.

Bond's debut novel is *The Room on the Roof* (1956) when he was only seventeen. The novel tells the narrative of Rusty, a young Anglo-Indian kid who feels out of place in his guardian's strict Dehradun home. Second, *Vagrants in the Valley* (2016), a sequel to *The Room on the Roof* (1956), explores similar environmental themes. Rusty, feeling confined by the rules and expectations forced on him, sets off on a voyage of self-discovery, establishing unlikely connections and navigating the difficulties of adolescence along the way. Set against the gorgeous background of the Himalayan foothills, the story captures the coming-of-age spirit, delving into themes of identity, belonging, and the human desire for freedom. Academically, it has garnered critical attention for its portrayal of Indian society and its cultural nuances, as well as its adept handling of adolescent themes. Scholars have praised Bond's evocative prose style, seamlessly weaving together elements of nostalgia, humor, and poignant introspection. Moreover, the novel's enduring popularity among readers of all ages underscores its significance within the canon of Indian literature in English.

UNVEILING THE HEART OF THE HIMALAYAS: ECOLOGICAL THEMES IN *THE ROOM ON THE ROOF*

Ruskin Bond skillfully incorporates the natural world of the Himalayas into the narrative fabric, using ecocritical themes to highlight protagonist Rusty's path of self-discovery. Ecocriticism reveals the Himalayan scenery as a character in its own right, impacting Rusty's emotional and psychological growth. One of the first descriptions of nature is “... gliding round the low hills, and soon the jungle on either side of the road began to give way to open fields and tea gardens and then to orchards and one or two houses.” (Bond,10) [9].

In *The Room on the Roof* (1956), Rusty, the protagonist, embodies Bond's emotions in nature. Bond's work displays his strong connection to nature. He enjoys jogging with the wind, smiling with the flowers, and conversing with the trees. In the other tale, Rusty finds comfort and security in the company of parental figures, represented by trees. His guardian appears to be whispering to him as it dances and

glides to the sound of music and breeze. He feels the warmth, chillness, and shade of a mother among the trees. Rusty's life is marked by uncertainty, yet his environment alters his perspective and causes him to forget. He desires to attain his goal. It motivates him to move forward.

In *The Room on the Roof*, Bond uses narrative elements such as India, Himalayas, hill stations, forests, bazaars, maidans, and cities. He also depicts seasons such as monsoon, spring, and mist, as well as flora, fauna, and elements like water, soil, sunlight, and the moon. Bond's writing heavily relies on landscape, which is typically used as a visual setting. Bond's evocative descriptions have practical significance. They contribute to the plot's accurate comprehension of the land, Rusty. Rusty experiences improved mental health after spending time in outdoors. In this novel, the protagonist gains psychological benefits from nature that are both desirable and healthful. In nature, Rusty develops independence and decision-making skills.

The novel opens with a sense of enclosure. Rusty's life in Mr. Harrison's house in Dehradun is depicted as stifling and restrictive. The "large, old-fashioned house" with its "high walls" and "shut windows" creates a physical barrier between Rusty and the natural world (Bond) [10]. This initial setting establishes a contrast between the artificiality of urban life and the freedom offered by nature. Rusty's yearning for escape from the confines of the house is constantly linked to his desire to be outdoors. He finds solace by gazing out the window at the distant mountains, a symbol of the natural world beckoning him (Bond, 4). This yearning foreshadows his later adventures in the Himalayas, where he finds a deeper connection with nature.

The descriptions of the natural world surrounding Dehradun are idyllic. Rusty describes the "bushes crowded with scarlet poinsettias" and the "smell of pine" wafting in from the nearby hills (Bond, 4). This portrayal of nature stands in stark contrast to the oppressive atmosphere of the house, highlighting its potential to provide solace and rejuvenation. While the natural world is initially presented as a source of escape and beauty, there are subtle hints of a disrupted human-nature relationship. Rusty observes a flock of pigeons "fighting over scraps" thrown away by the household, suggesting a competition for resources caused by human wastefulness (Bond, 5). This foreshadows the potential tension between human actions and the ecological balance.

The Himalayas are portrayed as a place of rejuvenation and spiritual connection with nature. Rusty finds solace in the "clean, sharp air" and the "vastness of the sky" (Bond, 52). The mountains become a refuge from the artificiality of his previous life and a source of inspiration and self-discovery. Rusty's experiences with the hill people offer a glimpse into a more sustainable way of life. He observes their self-sufficiency, living off the land, and using resources mindfully (Bond, 67). This contrasts with the wasteful habits of the household in Dehradun, highlighting the potential for a more harmonious relationship with the environment. The bustling Dehradun bazaar presents a stark contrast to the pristine beauty of the Himalayas. The overflowing stalls, haggling crowds, and piles of waste depict the impact of human consumption and potential disregard for the environment (Bond, 84). This encounter serves as a reminder of the challenges to maintaining ecological balance. The inclusion of animals like Tinker, the dog, and the baker's pigeons strengthens the connection between humans and the natural world. Their presence also serves as an indicator of the health of the environment. Tinker's playful nature reflects the vibrancy of the hills, while the pigeons struggling for scraps in the bazaar hint at the consequences of human actions (Bond, 85).

Despite the contrasting settings, some moments suggest a potential for respectful coexistence between humans and nature. Rusty's interactions with the Tonga driver who avoids harming an earthworm and the baker's care for his pigeons showcase a sense of respect for living creatures (Bond, 98, 86). These instances offer a glimmer of hope for a more ecological future.

Rusty's departure from the Himalayas, the ending emphasizes the enduring presence of nature. The "snow-covered peaks" remain a constant, reminder of the power and permanence of the natural world

(Bond, 178). This reinforces the idea that nature exists independent of human actions and continues even after Rusty leaves. The novel concludes without a clear resolution regarding Rusty's future. He chooses to return to Mr. Harrison's house, a symbol of societal expectations and potential detachment from nature. This ambiguity allows for ecocritical readings that consider the challenges of maintaining a connection with nature in a structured social environment [11].

After returning to Dehradun, Rusty's longing for the mountains lingers. He continues to find solace in stargazing and dreams of returning to the hills (Bond, 179). This persistent yearning suggests the transformative power of nature and the difficulty of fully severing that connection. While the ending doesn't depict a drastic shift in Rusty's lifestyle, there are subtle hints of potential change. His experiences in the Himalayas have undoubtedly shaped him. He might carry the values of simplicity and respect for nature he learned there, even within the confines of society [12].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "The Room on the Roof" establishes an ecocritical framework through contrasting settings and the symbolic use of nature. Bond's stories preach "Bond has immense faith in Nature and recommends his readers to trust nature and preserve it to sustain the environment which is under threat of great natural imbalance. The yearning for escape from the confines of the house and the beauty of the natural world lay the groundwork for exploring themes of human-nature connection, the impact of human actions, and the search for a more harmonious relationship with the environment. The contrasting environments of the Himalayas and the bazaar highlight the potential for both harmony and conflict in the human-nature relationship. As Govindappa comments, "customary readers and critics just notification that his stories reflect a specific connection between human creatures and nature, however they neglect to indicate what relationship it is, not to mention the writer's ecological awareness suggested in the stories." (Govindappa, 29) The presence of animals and the portrayal of sustainable living practices offer valuable insights., it offers a thought-provoking exploration of the challenges and possibilities of maintaining a connection with nature in a complex world. The enduring presence of the Himalayas, Rusty's lingering yearning, and the seeds of change he carries within him all contribute to a nuanced portrayal of the human-nature relationship.

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